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## Unsuccessful Encounters: Teachers meet researchers in schools

### Abstract

This paper describes an unsuccessful attempt to develop collaborative relationships between researchers and teachers in three schools. The focus of the project was an attempt to develop school-based effectiveness projects, in which teachers would take the lead in defining school improvement issues and acting on them. Portraiture was used as the device for gaining entry and stimulating debate about issues within each school. In none of the schools was this device successful, and the project foundered. The paper discusses possible reasons for the lack of success, and concludes with some reflections on the nature of relationships between researchers and practitioners.

Poetry, and the art which professes to regulate and limit its powers, cannot  
subsist together.

Shelley

The fate of art that tries to do without criticism is instructive.

Frye

This essay is about relationships in schools between teachers and researchers, seeking to understand how they might collaborate with each other. It is written from the point of view of researchers and is prompted by our recent experience in three schools. To set the tone for the paper, we should say at the outset that we would be disappointed if the teachers with whom we worked did not see these matters differently.

### **The background**

The authors share a strong interest in making schools more effective. By this we do not mean only the improvement of achievement in basic skills, although this is, in our view, a central part of what is needed. We hold that present achievement levels are not high enough, particularly for northern, native, or inner-city children. We believe that the achievement of these groups could be improved dramatically.

At the same time, we believe that schools could and should become warmer, more caring, and more interesting places for teachers, children and young people - and that these changes in school climate would be complementary to the kinds of improvement in achievement which we seek. The intellectual sources of these beliefs come in part from the burgeoning effective schools literature, but equally from some less well-known, but at least as important work on the sociology of schooling and of families (e.g., Lightfoot, 1978; Clark, 1983).

One of the authors has been intermittently pursuing a project in this area for several years. In 1984-85, as a result of an administrative leave, the opportunity to put something into practice in a meaningful way became possible. The second author offered the support of his unit within Manitoba Education and his own involvement in the project. A number of other colleagues took part in one aspect or another of the project.

### **The project**

How does one work with schools to make them more effective? We were interested in a model of school improvement which was based on truly collaborative and analytical relationships between people in schools and researchers. We felt strongly that change must take into account the "culture" of the school. We believed that external researchers might be able to play a useful role in helping teachers reflect on what they were doing, what it meant, and how they might be able to do it better. We wanted teachers to be full partners - indeed, senior partners - with us in the search for more effective education in their own settings. In that way, we felt, lasting change might occur.

We were able to find three schools - one high school and two elementary schools - which were interested (or at least, whose principals were interested) in taking part in such an enterprise. Two were inner-city schools, while the third was in an established working-class neighbourhood.

In each case we agreed to proceed in phases, the first of which was one of "getting to know" the staffs and the schools. How this was done varied: in-depth interviews of all staff

combined with casual, non-classroom observations in one school; interviews of staff together with visits to classrooms and casual observations in another; and a self-study process and day-long in-service session in the third. At least two of us were involved in each school, and we met regularly to confirm observations and discuss impressions.

The second phase came to entail the preparation of written "portraits" of life and work in the schools. We had data of too many kinds to synthesize in any other way. And we were intrigued by portraiture as a device for synthesis and communications with teachers. We wrote the portraits carefully, trying to be sympathetic, positive, balanced, descriptive, analytic, and interesting. In several instances, we played down or omitted information which we felt should not appear in print, even in a confidential draft to a staff. The portraits were group composites of the regularities and cultures we discerned in the schools, not collages or photographs, and were intended to make coherent the impressions and the many and different pieces of information we had of the schools.

The following excerpts from one of the portraits illustrate both our intentions and the tone of the portraits:

Many, perhaps most, students come to \_\_\_\_\_ with a deep distrust of schools and teachers. However positively their counsellors or friends describe \_\_\_\_\_ to them, their own experience in schools, which includes more than enough failure, insensitive treatment or regimentation, leaves them tentative in their initial approach to the school and its teachers . . . .

It is in these contexts, as well as that of (the preoccupation with) attendance, that the quality of student-teacher relationships has emerged as a (or the?) central element in \_\_\_\_\_'s educational theory in use. Relationships are to be: friendly, accepting and caring ("Kids come here because they want to belong some place."); sensitive and not pushy ("You can help but you have to be very careful how." "If they say 'Back off.' I do. I believe the students. They know things I don't."); and ultimately motivational (" . . . retaining them, exciting them, seeing them learn something. The real challenge is to find something that will motivate them.").

For the most part, day-to-day life in the school reflects and reinforces these themes. The most obvious feature of the school is the high quality of relationship and regard between teachers and students. It is present in the friendly respect shown to people in the office and hallways, in the affectionate horseplay

between teachers and students at break times, and in the banter that accompanies instruction, the seeking of favors of the handing out of bus passes.

Relationships of this quality are a significant accomplishment.

In preparing the portrait we realized the need to be sensitive to the perceptions of those in the schools. Our intent was to reflect these understandings, but within a larger context which might cause people to reconsider them. Thus we tried to find a delicate balance between showing that we understood, and being critical (in the good sense of the word). Some considerable thought and discussion went into finding that balance in the portraits.

### **The reactions of teachers**

The next step was to give the portraits to the staff of each school, and ask for their reactions. Our hope was that people might respond by saying that they recognized themselves, that they disagreed with some of what we wrote but agreed with much of it, and that the reading caused them to reflect on what they were doing in new ways.

The actual responses were rather different. The following were typical comments from one of the schools. "Your report was more 'literary' than we expected. Why didn't you just give us a table summarizing the results of the interviews?" "It comes out negative. We're a school, not a drop-in centre." In the second school, the reactions included: "I had hoped you would give us a pat on the back." "One-sided." "That is what I said but not what I meant." "Why do you mention the negative comments of a few teachers?". "Where is your evidence for this?". "Have you taught in a school like this one? Have you ever taught?" In the third school, the reaction was different, but ultimately just as fateful: "We can see what you describe being a problem in some schools, but not for us. There is no burning issue here. So what's the point?"

And so, in each school a decision was made not to proceed further. In the first case we were told "It would have been alright if you hadn't wanted to write about us"; in the second case, the teachers became uncertain whether they could "trust" us; and in the third, no obvious focus for collaboration between ourselves and teachers emerged. The project foundered because the portraits, instead of being the basis for ongoing work, were seen as indications that no such work was possible. Our attempts to build researchable and collaborative relationships with teachers were unsuccessful.

### **Explaining our lack of success**

In turn, our reaction was, and in some ways still is, one of puzzlement. If they were "right," how did we so badly misread the schools and so misconstrue them in our written portraits? If we were "right," what processes were at work, preventing them from acknowledging this and leading them to retreat from their own development?

Many partial explanations have occurred to us. We worked with incommensurate and incomplete information; given more time, and more complete descriptions of life and work in the schools, might we have done better? Or perhaps a different process might have led to a different result -- conceivably we could have discussed our impressions with them before setting them to paper.

We were perhaps not as sensitive as we should have been to the interests, aspirations and self-understandings of teachers. We may have underestimated the extent to which the teachers expected us to validate their work or administrators expected us to legitimize their efforts or get them out of trouble with their superiors. Perhaps the teachers wished themselves portrayed differently, highlighting their integrity and strength of character; might we have been more sympathetic and understanding of the daily compromises that teachers must make? Or were the portraits too neat, making work appear more standardized than it was and diminishing the individuality and expressiveness of teachers and administrators?

Portraiture may be too evocative a device; it may be asking too much of people to be analytic or neutral toward, or ignore, portraits of themselves. Portraits of the character and culture of schools may be inherently more risk-laden for teachers than, for example, the simple tabulation of the results of a survey. This is especially likely when portraits challenge the myths which dominate schools or question teachers' justifications for their work.

We may also have been naive about the internal dynamics of schools with "in" and "out" groups or of schools in which teachers felt compelled to disavow in public what they had said with conviction in private.

Each of these explanations may offer a partial account of our inability to work collaboratively with teachers and administrators and to interpret their life and work in schools in a way with which they could identify. Yet we think the matter is deeper than these explanations suggest.

And so we ask: How, and how well, can we come to know the day-to-day worlds of teachers and administrators? Can we

separate ourselves from our status and roles as, for example, civil servants and university professors? Can teachers move beyond their perceptions of our status and roles and see us as colleagues?

### **Interpreting life and work in schools: Notes for observers**

Short of either engaging in mutual flattery or of radical transformations in our respective roles (in which, for example, researchers might enter schools in the manner of worker-priests or in which teachers are socialized to take a much more analytic view of their work), we now see these reactions as having been, to some extent at least, inevitable. They are inherent when one engages in a critical interpretation of the life and work of another. We have come to regret, not the difference of view, but our inability to take advantage of it in the pursuit of the development of ourselves, and of the teachers with whom we worked.

Each of us has a world view, the images and patterns of which are products of our individual biographies, the roles we play, the positions we hold, and the status which we are granted. We cannot choose to have a world view; nor can we set aside the one which we have acquired. As academics, we have been socialized to the traditions of science; as intellectuals we value conceptual and analytic skills; as advocates of our point of view we support persuasive argumentation and debate.

There are gaps, for the most part very difficult to bridge, between these views we hold and the realities of individuals we observe in schools -- students, classroom teachers, teachers with special roles, administrators, and others. We cannot completely know the feelings and perceptions of others, simply because we have not experienced life and work as others have.

We can try to understand and interpret the experience of these persons as they tell it to us or as we observe it. But all of our interpretations, however hard we try to objectify them or mask them with the honorific, "theory," are creations and like biography and autobiography, because they are selective, fictions.

The task of interpretation is, in the first instance, to recreate what we have observed, to make it accessible, coherent, and sensible to us as observers; it is to reshape what we have seen so that it fits within our established or emerging world view. It involves postulating or attributing purposiveness, connections, assumptions and their implications, antecedents and consequences, accomplishments and explanations. Its concern is with finding structure, pattern or regularity, even in the apparently irrational. As observers we postulate our own purposes with connections, or those familiar from our own contexts, whether or not they are those which actually operated in the situation.

Interpretations are starting points for relationships between researchers and people in schools. It is regrettable that they too often become, as ours did, ending points as well. What is clear is that the development of these relationships -- the accomplishment of intersubjectivity, as it were -- requires ongoing, and carefully crafted processes of communication leading to the creation of shared interpretations. This is an endlessly complex and immensely difficult task in one sense, even though it is just what people do every day with each other.

### **Summary and conclusions**

In a relationship between teachers and researchers there are no clear expectations to guide relationships. In most social settings we have a pretty good idea of what to expect from people. It is when these expectations are violated that problems arise, leading us to ask: "What is happening here." But, as the ethnomethodologists have shown (e.g., Garfinkel, 1967; Mehan, 1979) humans are endlessly talented at inventing social order, and extremely resistant to shifts in the order they know.

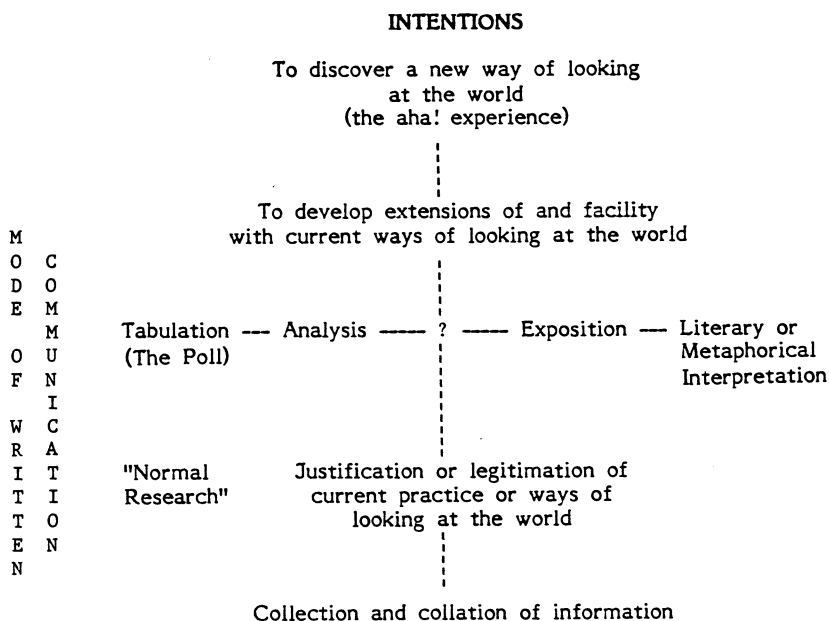
In the schools in which we worked the teachers fell back on their typified ideas about researchers. They expected certain kinds of behaviour as being "what researchers do." When what we did was something different, they were caught off guard, and were resistant. Ironically, we might have been better able to initiate the kind of developmental work we wanted had we adopted a much more typical research stance. This would have provided a shared understanding of what we were doing, although we wonder about the possibility of working from that shared understanding towards something new.

Our efforts (conceptualized in this way chiefly in retrospect) were to do something different from what we might call normal research. The figure below illustrates two dimensions which are key to field research. They are: the intentions of the researchers, and the mode of presentation of findings. The bottom left quadrant of the resulting chart is normal field research, in which the intent is largely descriptive or justificatory, and such modes of presentation as tabulations of data and exposition are dominant. This is, we now realize, what teachers expected from us.

Our desires, however, were to try to move towards the top right quadrant, in which our intent would be to reconceptualize experience, and the mode of presentation would be literary, metaphorical, and highly interpretive. This orientation is the basis for much of the recent so-called qualitative or phenomenological research.

The difficulty with the top right quadrant is that there are

no commonly-accepted rules for the doing of the work. Even within the research community, accepted procedures for qualitative work are only now being developed. As we learned, there are even more problems when one attempts to apply these approaches in settings where the participants do not understand or necessarily accept the underlying assumptions.



We needed, it appears, to spend more time at the outset in trying to explain to teachers, and to get support for, our seemingly unconventional way of proceeding. And yet that recommendation is itself glib. In fact, the schools felt that it took too long as it was for things to begin. Living in a world of immediacy and action, their ability to accept or participate in many discussions about such matters was limited indeed. There was need for some tangible product as quickly as possible. Yet the product, when presented, was not what was wanted.

We are led to a pessimistic conclusion. Two of the schools which participated in our project were, we believe, more open, more reflective, and more analytical than most. Yet our approach did not work with them. We now wonder if the kind of relationship we sought - one of equal collaboration between teachers and researchers - is indeed possible. Perhaps the life worlds of the two activities are simply too far apart to allow bridges to be built. Certainly it is possible for researchers to enter a setting, and write accounts of it which are powerful and useful for other researchers. Equally, it may be possible --



though we are less certain of this -- for researchers to write accounts which are recognized as true by teachers. We suspect, however, that it is next to impossible for researchers' accounts to form the basis for sustained reflection and action on the part of teachers, any more than one culture might decide to change its patterns on the basis of a report on those practices done by someone from another culture. If possible at all, such collaborative relationships could occur only when there was very strong interest within a school, reinforcement from school leaders (official and unofficial), and a very large investment of time on the part of all concerned - conditions which are rarely to be found.

We have not yet reflected fully on the implications of our conclusion. Does it mean that school effectiveness must, after all, be a directed rather than an emerging process? Does it mean that researchers and those they seek to study will necessarily remain as two solitudes? Does it mean that qualitative research will not be able to serve as the medium for free communication which theorists such as Habermas applaud? We do not know. While the outcomes of our work have not saddened us, they have made us wonder. Ironically, the persons who may reflect on the project in such a way as to change what they do could turn out to be the researchers themselves.

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